

## STANDING ON TIPTOE

**Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo  
Union Church of Pocantico Hills  
July 19, 2020**

Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24

Romans 8:12-25

I am continuing this morning with my series of sermons on Saint Paul's letter to the Romans, drawing from the book *Not Ashamed of the Gospel* by Fleming Rutledge.

One thing I've really missed during our extended hiatus from in-person worship because of the pandemic is baptisms. All baptisms are special, but I particularly love holding the little babies. They are so tiny and delicate and beautiful. I have a deep instinct—I suppose we all do—to want to protect these precious children from any kind of hurt whatsoever, to shield them from all the pain, disappointment, and sadness that inevitably accompany growing up in this world. Of course, it is impossible to do that. All of us who are parents know that all too well. Our loved ones are vulnerable—and, therefore, so are we.

The apostle Paul speaks to this vulnerability in today's lesson from Romans. He takes up the problem of suffering, declaring, "I judge that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed in us."<sup>1</sup> For Paul, our human vulnerability and suffering have to be understood in the context of faith and baptism.

Throughout the central portion of Romans, Paul is talking about baptism into Christ, and the baptismal gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit that makes the Christian life happen; and, as Paul makes clear in various ways, the Christian life is a process of being molded into the shape of Christ's life. Now Paul, you may remember, did not know Jesus during our Savior's lifetime. So for Paul, what stands out particularly about Christ's life is not his ministry of healing and teaching—in fact, we don't believe Paul knew too much about that—but rather his crucifixion and his resurrection. Paul understands the life of the Christian community as following that pattern, as a kind of crucifixion and resurrection. He writes, "We were buried . . . with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."<sup>2</sup> We repeat those words in the liturgy of every baptism.

So what Paul is telling us is that being joined to Christ in baptism means not only receiving all the benefits of his divine life, but also sharing with him in his sufferings. Baptism means adoption into God's family, lasting fellowship with him and the other brothers and sisters, the forgiveness of sins, empowerment for a life of joyful service, and the promise of eternal life—but it also means, inevitably, entering into a life of identification with the world just as the Son of God did. For Jesus did not, as Paul says in Philippians, "hold on to" his divine privileges, but "emptied himself"—in other words, he

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:18.

<sup>2</sup> Romans 6:4.

humbled himself by becoming human—; he entered into our life and was obedient even to death on the cross.<sup>3</sup> The Christian life follows this pattern on its way to the resurrection of the dead. As Paul writes, “We suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”<sup>4</sup>

Some of the more cynical among us may be wondering whether the promise of glory down the road is worth the price of suffering in the here and now. Paul has no doubt that it is. For one thing, he is persuaded that the Spirit of the Risen Christ has commissioned him personally to spread the good news that no amount of suffering in this world is even remotely comparable to, as Paul puts it, “the glory that is to be revealed in us.” Paul has experienced God’s transforming power in his own life, and he is absolutely convinced that God is at work even now in transforming and redeeming all that God has made. One day suffering will be no more, and in the meanwhile, suffering is never the final word. Indeed, Paul tells us that nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

But Paul’s word to us is more than simply a prediction that future glory will outweigh present suffering, or even the practical counsel that since suffering that is an inevitable part of life, we should passively accept whatever is bound to come. Rather, he speaks of baptized Christians entering into a lifetime of active engagement with the forces of sin, evil, and death, in the name of the Lord who entered this battle before us, for our sakes, and emerged victorious on the other side of suffering and death.

Paul’s realism is notable. Never does he call the Christian community to look away from this troubled world to a blissful future. The opposite is true. Our destiny is explicitly linked to the rest of God’s creation: other peoples, the Earth, all living things, the stars and planets, outer space and beyond. In this passage—uniquely—Paul summons us to a new style of living *on behalf of the suffering cosmos* which does not know that its Savior is at hand.

Or does it? Consider again this remarkable passage from his letter:

The creation waits with eager longing [Paul writes] for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God. . . .<sup>5</sup>

The entire creation, Paul says—the whole created order, all of nature and the universe—is standing ‘on tiptoe’<sup>6</sup>—that’s the way J. B. Phillips translated this verse—to see what God will do as he fulfills his promise to remake his children in the image of Christ. When this happens, it will mean that the effects of sin and death have been reversed forever, the image of God has been restored to humanity, and this whole “universal frame” will enter into a new and permanent state of blessedness greater even than the original Paradise that God created. That original Eden was ruined by the sin of

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<sup>3</sup> Philippians 2:5-8.

<sup>4</sup> Romans 8:17.

<sup>5</sup> Romans 8:19.

<sup>6</sup> J. B. Phillips, trans., *The New Testament in Modern English* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000 [1962]), 264.

Adam, Paul has told us in chapter 5; to use his words in today’s lesson, it was “subjected to futility.” The futility, as we’ve seen, lies in the fact that we can decide to do good, but there is a force within us that Paul calls “sin” that is there to trip us up. We may truly delight in God’s commands, but it’s obvious that we have split personalities. Parts of the human heart covertly rebel, and just when we least expect it, they take charge.<sup>7</sup> From this futility God has rescued us, not only the human race, but also the creation itself, and set us “free from bondage to decay,” free for “the glorious liberty of the children of God.”

It may seem somewhat absurd to think of nature standing on tiptoe (“waiting with eager longing”) for the final revelation of God’s baptized children. After all, what’s so special about us Christians? The world these days seems to be largely indifferent, indeed sometimes actively hostile, to the Church. Yet Paul means exactly what he says. God’s purpose, which cannot fail, is to restore the creation *through the agency of his church as it suffers on behalf of that creation*. True Christians are environmentalists. Paul suggests that wounded nature senses something that human beings do not; one commentator on Romans gives the wonderful illustration of the station-master’s dog who runs out to greet the approaching train long before the waiting passengers hear it or see it. The Lord of nature will return to restore his creation, and he is at hand.

To be a baptized Christian, then, means to be actively involved in the world as Christ was—not standing apart from it while it goes to hell, but taking its wounds, scars, and afflictions upon ourselves. This is what is meant by “the revealing of the [children] of God”; when that day comes, the creation will recognize its crucified Savior and Lord in the self-giving acts that were done in his name by his disciples. Nowhere in Scripture is it clearer that being a Christian does not mean a flight from reality.

But what gives us the strength to march into this battle? How will the little ones whom we baptize into this faith meet all the challenges of the world, let alone the call to be Christ’s faithful servants and soldiers, fighting—as one of the old baptismal liturgies put it—“under his banner against sin, the world, and the devil...unto life’s end.”<sup>8</sup> I hardly need to tell you that each life is touched by its own tragedies and afflictions: the deaths of those we love, failed marriages, economic hardships, disease, disappointment, dreams deferred. Coping with it all is hard enough. The Christian is confronted with the additional challenge of trying to remain faithful when there is no evidence of any meaning or sense in what is happening. It is this extremity of doubt that Paul understands and addresses in his eighth chapter. It is in the context of seeming God-forsakenness that Paul speaks of *hope*.

In this hope [of the redemption of all creation and the glorious liberty of the children of God, Paul writes,] we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope—for who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with endurance.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 2044.

<sup>8</sup> Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1928), 280.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 8:24-25.

It is the nature of Christian hope that it goes on hoping when there seems to be no basis for hope. Paul writes that the whole creation is waiting in this kind of hope—“waiting with eager longing” for the day when the wolf will lie down with the lamb,<sup>10</sup> and swords will be beaten into ploughshares,<sup>11</sup> and the barren woman will be a joyous mother,<sup>12</sup> and the eyes of the blind will be opened,<sup>13</sup> and water will break forth in the wilderness,<sup>14</sup> and the trees of the field will clap their hands.<sup>15</sup> But why should we believe this? What reason is there besides “I believe because I believe?” What evidence is there for Christian hope?

In many respects there really is no evidence at all, not the kind that would ever convince a skeptic. And yet there do seem to me to be reasons for holding on to faith in God’s future, in the glorious liberty of the children of God.’ These are some of the reasons I believe:

- I believe because the Holy Scriptures, the Old and New Testaments, have been for me an unfailing and inexhaustible source of life and renewal for many years of daily testing;
- I believe because the extraordinary lives of Christians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King and Desmond Tutu convince me of the truth they are ready to suffer for and even to die for;
- I believe because Jesus of Nazareth remains the single most compelling and commanding figure in human history and I see in the great church that has been gathered in his name over 2,000 years from all corners of the world the power of the One who raised this crucified person from the dead.

Some of you may have visited St. Michael’s Church on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, which has a beautiful series of windows designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany to represent St. Michael the Archangel’s Victory in Heaven. One of the windows wraps around the apse of the church, over the altar. It depicts the moment in God’s future when St. Michael will have defeated the powers of sin, death, and the devil. St. Michael is not mentioned in any of Paul’s writings; he appears in other parts of the Bible which are more pictorial and figurative.<sup>16</sup> Paul, in Romans, speaks to us of God’s apocalyptic war vividly, but usually in concepts; some of the other biblical writers dramatize it for us in images like that of St. Michael, who is the Lord’s field-commander on the Last Day.

Little ones in St. Michael’s Church are baptized under that window of the triumph of the heavenly host over every form of evil, with the old prayer, that they remain Christ’s faithful soldiers and servants until life’s end. The juxtaposition of these infants and the battle imagery would be either preposterous or monstrous were it not for the source of our baptismal strength, the Christian hope to which the window bears witness—

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<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 11:6-9.

<sup>11</sup> Isaiah 2:4.

<sup>12</sup> Psalm 113:9.

<sup>13</sup> Isaiah 35:5.

<sup>14</sup> Isaiah 35:6.

<sup>15</sup> Isaiah 55:12.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Jude 1:9ff, Revelation 12:7ff.

the coming triumph of God, prefigured in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the jaws of death.

The motifs of Union Church's glorious windows are different from St. Michael's in New York, but they tell the same truth. They depict Christ in his humility, taking human form, the servant of all. And they remind us of Christ in his majesty. Jesus is Lord. We are baptized into his death and into his victory. This is the source of our courage. This is the source of our hope. This is the source of our faith. Paul tells us "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." Do you love him? Do you hear his call? Is Jesus powerful beyond the grave? Will your life and my life have meaning?

The whole creation, straining on tiptoe with eager anticipation like the stationmaster's dog, joyfully answers: Yes. Yes.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.